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## Book Reviews

Journal of South Asian Development  
13(2) 228–239  
© 2018 SAGE Publications India  
Private Limited  
SAGE Publications  
sagepub.in/home.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0973174118768109  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/sad>



**Olle Törnquist, John Harriss, Neera Chandhoke and Fredrik Engelstad. (Eds). 2016. *Reinventing Social Democratic Development: Insights from Indian and Scandinavian Comparisons*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. 366 pages. GBP 19.99 (paperback). ISBN 9788776942007.**

This book has taken up the compelling task of comparing Scandinavian social democracy with social democracy in India, both actual and potential. While the first is a global exemplar, the second is found in an uncertain and localized form and is—in the current context of Hindutva’s triumphant rise—increasingly marginalized.

The comparison clears the field for exploring possibilities to meet present and future challenges in both contexts. While challenges for India consist of setting up a legal institutional framework for securing even the basic rights and welfare of its vast working population, for Scandinavia they include issues such as managing immigration, the spread of the informal economy and the state’s rising revenue demands in the face of an ageing population. An old question that remains implicit and begs exploration beyond this comparison is whether social democracy—that works its way through economic, social and institutional *modification* of capital’s aggressive drive for profit and privatization—is capable of overcoming these challenges, or whether a more radical socialist solution needs to be imagined.

Four areas of departure mark the book’s contour of comparison both within as well as across the countries, as Olle Törnquist and John Harriss set out in Chapter 1. An enquiry is made into the modes of building democratic alliances essential for social democracy’s popularity and sustainability. In addition, the mediatory practices and institutions that link society with the state are explored as they make possible the formulation and implementation of social policies. Struggles for socio-economic and civil–political rights are also studied for their role in ensuring social welfare in the widest possible sense. Finally, initiatives to develop a growth compact between labour and capital, industrial and agrarian workers, and—especially in India—between formal and informal workers are followed to determine social democracy’s economic viability.

Several essays in the volume, by Törnquist and Harriss themselves, as well by Hilde Sandvik, Torsten Svensson, Fredrik Engelstad and Kalle Moene give us detailed and nuanced accounts of what made social democracy work in the Scandinavian countries. Even at the risk of sounding simplistic, it makes sense to summarize the key social and historical transformations to contrast the Indian case.

As late entrants to the industrial world, Sweden and Norway required use of advanced technology and an educated workforce which was available because literacy had spread through Protestantism and Lutheran Christianity. By the turn of the twentieth century, both countries had a sizeable, mostly poor and unemployed, yet small and culturally homogenous, population.

In the 1920s, as global capitalism faced a crisis, an imaginative solution was needed for sustaining production which neither the workers' movements nor the conservative business groups could offer. Rather, the party of the social democrats offered an acceptable way out: for capitalism to continue, big business should cover the welfare and employment needs of the working class. On their part, the industrial workers successfully made an alliance with the agrarian classes (reducing chances of Fascism as in Germany) and brought the white collar workers on a common platform. So, by instituting negotiation across classes, social democracy framed a growth coalition between capital and labour, enlarged social control over the market, saved capitalism and emerged as a hegemon (Chapters 2 and 4).

Such a 'broad coalition of social forces' transcending particularistic group interests was indeed a 'socially transformative politics' with all-round economic advantages (Chapter 5). But there had to be a historically evolved and socially inclusive basis for it to happen. We get a sense of that in Torsten Svensson's tracing of the nineteenth century 'social corporatism' (Chapter 7). This, he shows, was made possible over three centuries by the confiscation of land from the church and aristocracy, sweeping administrative reforms, promotion of parish meetings, setting up of municipalities and, generally, by cultivating a liberal public space.

Here, Hilde Sandvik's discussion on *ting*, a local meeting-point where the royalty and the subject routinely met to strike an agreement or bargain (*tinga*) assumes added importance. While these meetings were local producers of social citizens, the site got enlarged as parliament replaced the king in appointing the government (1880s), and further with universal suffrage in Norway (1913) and Sweden (1921). In sum, Scandinavia emerged as a social democratic region with an industrially advanced welfare economy run on a growth compact between capital and labour based on a high degree of social trust and institutional participation that was supported by homogeneous and grossly inclusive social bases. Social equality and market worked in tandem to withstand international competition and turned a relatively poor region in the 1930s into one of the world's most advanced economic clusters (Chapter 10).

However, Scandinavian social democracy has its own challenges too. Though it has attained a fine balance of productive and protective elements by implementing market opportunities and regulations, Engelstad perceives in an essay framed within Polanyi's 'double movement' that, the economy is based on high productivity and high taxation (Chapter 9). Demographic changes now make state investments more costly, and global migration has created zones of informal production with low wages and social insecurities. 'In the long run', he says, 'this may lead to the welfare state being hollowed out'.

As is obvious, India's story could not be more different historically, socially, economically and politically. To cut it really short, India houses a hyper-heterogeneous population roughly 50 times bigger than Scandinavia. It is divided by myriad

lines of difference along caste, class, ethnicity, religion and region. The country inherited a developed state from its colonial past and evolved a noisy constitutional democracy with weak but sustained structures of liberal governance (at times and in places under siege) in conditions of extreme inequality and massive poverty. Soon after coming to power, the hegemonic Congress party split the trade union, gave up land reforms, favoured the rural rich and big industrial houses, and mobilized the white collar workers. These 'dominant propertied classes' penetrated the state, undermined its autonomy and rendered the Scandinavian kind of 'growth compact' (involving the state, industry and labour) impossible. Moreover, as Harriss and Törnquist (Chapter 2) point out, many of the social and economic rights that were promised before independence got elbowed out to find mention in the non-justiciable Directive Principles of the republic's Constitution.

Neera Chandhoke draws attention to a break in India's social policy regime in 2004, as the UPA-1 government was elected to power (Chapter 8). This government recognized some critical Directive Principles as justiciable Fundamental Rights. Chandhoke rightly argues that such progressive reforms would not have been possible without a confluence of civil society activism and judicial pressure. In addition, the formidable pressure of the Left parties on whom the government was crucially dependent also needs a mention. However, these changes remained cosmetic, amenable to reversals during the NDA government a decade later. There was no powerful social movement to back the reforms. Even the National Alliance for People's Movements, which Harriss mentions in his essay, had a restricted regional spread and could scarcely transcend its middle class orientation. Still, the legislation passed during the UPA-1—such as NREGA (to enhance the livelihood security of the rural households with 100 days of wage employment), or the Right to Education Act or the Recognition of Forest Rights Act—were important steps forward, even if more in a formal sense. They set out the legal and institutional framework for asserting social and economic rights that any government, irrespective of its agenda, would find it difficult to avoid.

A vast majority of Indian workers are in scattered small-scale informal sector, both urban and rural, seeking protection not from their employers, who are exempted from such legal obligations, but the state. Frequently, the organizational site for such workforce is their neighbourhood rather than workplace and their collective is constituted more often than not by considerations of community, ethnicity or gender than class. This marks a departure from orthodox Marxist understandings of class, yet it is not detrimental to improving welfare and delivery mechanism through a compact between state and labour, where capital remains an exogenous party. In fact, some recent scholarships on Indian labour organization have shown that the working class engaged in the informal sector has gained more in conditions where a state government, driven by its neoliberal instinct of attracting investment, assisted in skill-development and ensured better welfare for labour than a state governed by the social democrats. Informal workers also stand to gain in solidarity with formal workers. For instance, Harriss has shown that informal workers, who constitute 65 per cent of CITU's membership, have succeeded in procuring some systemic benefits (such as improved delivery through PDS) when the formal sector workers lent them support. In India's 'growth compact', therefore, the state

is expected to play a far more compensatory role for a majority workforce than the employers, and a broad concurrence of interests is necessary between the formal and informal workers for welfare enhancement.

Harriss and Törnquist (Chapter 3) pay a good deal of attention to Kerala and West Bengal, the two states that somewhat fit the conditions of social democracy in India. Drawing upon a large pool of existing studies, the chapter compares the two, and also their social democratic credentials with the Scandinavian countries. Both states had elected governments headed by the communists and they managed to maintain poverty elasticity for growth better than most other Indian states. While Kerala (with frequent change in government) topped the country's list in human development, West Bengal (with more than three decades of continuous Left rule) remained middle-ranking. Social democracy followed very different tracks in these two states with contrary outcomes. In Kerala, the Left waged socially embedded movements against caste privileges and feudalism by aligning with the socialist faction of anti-colonial nationalism. This helped build a broad alliance of the low ranked Ezhava, Muslim and Christian communities in a common struggle for land reforms, tenancy rights and agricultural wages as well as for social equality and inclusive institutions. With civil society's help and the communists' organizational strength Kerala modelled itself as an ideal social democratic experiment in health care, education, people's planning and decentralization not just in the country, but in the global South. The case of West Bengal was however different. Here, the first generation of communist leaders were urban and upper caste. While they mobilized popular movements to secure the material interests of the industrial workers, sharecroppers, agricultural workers, unemployed youth, government employees, schoolteachers as well as refugee migrants following the Partition, their social reach remained limited. West Bengal had a less rigid and more dispersed caste domination and far more desperate poverty and destitution than Kerala, prompting the communists to privilege basic legal and economic demands such as regularization of occupied land, ownership of farmland, security of tenure, procurement of wages, maintenance of job, etc. over social inclusion and civil rights. While this strengthened the instrumental grip of the party through an elaborate patronage structure, it did not enable the communists to gain the kind of moral-ideological depth in civil society as in Kerala. Consequently, when the Left was defeated in 2011, the collapse was almost complete: its popular base shifted to the rival Trinamool Congress for similar patronage, killing any chance of retrieval for now.

India's federal character sets limits to how far a state can pursue social democratic policies. In his essay, Naresh Chandra Saxena (Chapter 6) sees the solution in formulating social policies at the top (where the policy makers are avowedly free from interference) so as to avoid state-level clientilistic networks that tend to divert funds for populist projects. While substantial administrative reforms are no doubt necessary to root out corruption, one wonders how *Niti.Ayog* as a centrist body for policy direction is more suitable than the Planning Commission for better implementation of social policies. Instead of locating India's public policy deficiencies only in its administrative inefficiency, Pranab Bardhan refers to a broader 'systemic impasse' (Chapter 11). He fruitfully suggests a number of

alternatives to overhaul the system such as creating more opportunities for the youth in acquiring skills and education, moving from vulnerabilities in the informal sector to better formal sector jobs, shifting from targeted welfare to broad-based provisioning of public goods, and implementing universal programmes for health, education and housing.

India remains a bundle of perennial skirmishes. Here, common law copes with regional plurality, a handful of home-grown MNCs float in the vast sea of locally rooted non-corporate capital, community solidarity survives with acute inequality, poverty expands amidst plenty, skilled labour remains underemployed, farmers commit suicide in the face of record economic growth, hunger for public education and health is met with pitiable state expenditure, and social justice is resisted by religious authoritarianism. In short, India is redefining democracy, including social democracy. While a comparison with Scandinavia offers the country a measure of what remains to be achieved, it also shows us how its path has to be different, how the depth and magnitude of its developmental challenges cannot be scaled by apparatuses devised elsewhere. When the world is witnessing an unprecedented concentration of wealth while the Left in the world's largest democracy is seemingly at the end of its wit, *Reinventing Social Democratic Development* offers a timely call to rethink the key ideas of social democratic development out of their small and cherished European confines.

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**Rob Jenkins and James Manor. 2017. *Politics and the Right to Work: India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act*. London: Hurst and Company. pp. xiii + 323, £25.00. ISBN 978-1-84904-570-4.**

DOI: 10.1177/0973174118768110

India went through a rights revolution of sorts beginning in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. This included the enactment of the Right to Information Act in 2005, the Forest Rights Act in 2006 and the Right to Education Act in 2009. Arguably, the most ambitious of these laws is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) enacted in 2005, which is the subject of the book under review authored by two veterans of India's institutional reforms: Rob Jenkins and James Manor. The authors rightly refer to the NREGA as one of the developing world's most ambitious anti-poverty initiatives, which provides for a 'right to work' by guaranteeing 100 days of work annually to every rural household.

This is a multi-scalar study that captures the politics and policymaking processes at the national level (Chapter 2). It offers a fine-grained analysis of NREGA implementation at the state, district and sub-district levels in the neighbouring